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SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM AFAR

SUMMARY

¶11. (U) In two separate September forays into southern and western areas of Afar regional state, Embassy staff found a marginalized population, neglected by formal central government structures, and dependent on their communal pastoralist lifestyle to sustain them through the three months of the year during which they do not receive food assistance. Denied any humanitarian relief allocation during the current drought, the joint Ethiopian Government (GoE)-donor Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) and its new Pastoral Assistance Pilot initiative provide critical support to one of Ethiopia's most remote and destitute regions. EmbOff also visited two USG-funded projects in southern Afar which empower women through economic independence and combating gender-based discrimination so endemic to Afari culture. End Summary.

SIX YEARS WITHOUT RAINS

¶12. (U) While fertile valleys along Afar's western boundary tease one with false hopes of fleeting prosperity, the Afari landscape quickly gives way to a desiccated wasteland of thorn bushes, scrub brush, and barren caked earth. Gulina woreda officials in western Afar reported on September 8 that the region has received only minimal rains over the past six years resulting in the nearly absolute depletion of any pasture in the woreda. In response, many pastoralists from the area had migrated away to neighboring Amhara region or southern parts of Afar in search of pasture. While some may return as conditions improve, local officials reported a sharp increase in "pastoralist drop-outs" who have given up the traditional way of life due to environmental conditions.

¶13. (U) Driving through the woreda, EmbOffs observed consistently skinny cattle, but sheep and goats in relatively better physical condition. Locals explained that the four days of the current "rainy" season during which rain did fall did help regenerate shrubs which small ruminants can eat, but larger animals such as cattle, which require grasses, cannot. Still, after only three to five days of sun green shoots already begin to vanish from the region's fragile ecosystem. Woreda officials noted that recent months had seen a sharp increase in livestock deaths including over 300 camels, one thousand cattle, and 900 shoats throughout the woreda. Despite the current dire conditions, locals reported that this is the first time the woreda has seen appreciable levels of malnutrition in three years, with over 80 malnourished children from two of the woreda's kebeles having been seen at health centers. Sparse health care facilities likely limit the numbers of cases reported. Locals showed EmbOffs the

wild berries that they have begun eating over the past two months to make up for the lack of adequate food stocks. Because, culturally, Afaris feed babies and children first, the area has seen much more prominent incidents of malnutrition among adults and teens than other areas in the country.

NO "RELIEF" IN SIGHT

¶4. (U) Despite the clear plight of the Afari population, the GoE has yet to establish a formal figure for the number of beneficiaries in need of relief food assistance. Despite the fact that the PSNP is designed to safeguard productive household and community assets to sustain external shocks, and is specifically not designed as a food relief mechanism, the GoE has continued to argue that the Safety Net will cover the needs of Afar. While the Safety Net normally provides external assistance to beneficiary households for nine months of the year, the effects of the drought have forced administrators to approve "contingency" Safety Net resources to cover the remaining three months -- effectively putting the region on social support for the entire year. True to their pastoral ways, residents indicated that their community's first priority is the rehabilitation of grazing land, initiatives supported by the PSNP's Pastoral Assistance Pilot effort that leverages community labor to delimit area enclosures where grazing is restricted to allow for pasture regeneration.

¶5. (U) Despite the fact that local woreda officials determine

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the number of beneficiaries requiring assistance, locals report that regional or central government officials unilaterally revise these figures downward without reviewing local conditions, consulting local authorities, or allowing a mechanism to appear the determinations. Gulina woreda officials told EmbOffs that although over 13,000 people in their community require food assistance, the GoE has unilaterally set the approved PSNP beneficiary figure at 7,950. They reported a similar experience in neighboring Teru woreda where the official beneficiary tally was set at 10,000 despite over 21,000 needing support. Despite the final official figures, Afari cultural norms dictate that all in the community share what they have with each other. As such, while PSNP beneficiaries share their food allocations with their neighbors, those in the community who do not need external support also share what they have with beneficiary families as well as those who fall through the porous safety net. As a result, beneficiaries on average may finally consume closer to five kilograms of food per month, as compared to the reduced ration of ten kilograms provided by the PSNP, or the 15 kilograms apportioned when the country has adequate food stocks to meet domestic needs.

USG FUNDED PROJECTS EMPOWER WOMEN, BENEFIT COMMUNITY

¶6. (U) In a separate trip to central Afar, EmbOff visited the DRL funded Hope for Women Project (Hope Project) in Chifra Woreda, and also a small livestock replenishment project in Gewane Woreda funded by the Ambassador's Special Self Help (SSH) Fund. Both projects primarily benefit women and children, seeking to empower women to solve their own problems through economic independence and education. They both also have the right political support: they are backed heavily by the Afar Regional Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and an Afari federal Parliamentarian and regional First Lady.

¶7. (U) In Afar generally, women suffer from gender-specific human rights abuses such as female genital mutilation (FGM), lack of access to education, and a lack of equal rights seen in early marriages (absuma), wife inheritances, negligible

property rights, and a work overload. Further, women typically lack decision-making power and their economic dependence on men, who often exhibit and pass down sexist attitudes, exacerbates gender abuses across generations. Any solution must therefore target both genders. The two-year Hope Project trains key community decision-makers (e.g. imams, clan leaders, and government officials, all mostly men) in women's rights and then hosts community-wide dialogues on these issues. It also created 20 all-women savings cooperatives that offer a needed economic buffer against community-wide hardships, while also providing women with growing economic independence and a forum for discussing gender abuses. Many cooperative members reported concrete results in reducing the amount of FGM cases (approx. 20) in Chifra due to these forums. The head of the MoWA also said a recent region-wide conference between officials, elders, and religious leaders decided to attach heavy penalties (50 to 100 camels and no burial rights) for individuals caught circumcising women.

¶18. (U) Successive drought and conflict strike women particularly hard in Briforo town in Gewane woreda. The 30 beneficiary households of the SSH project lost between 50 to 70 percent of their livestock from repeated droughts. Also, conflict with the neighboring Issa tribe over border expansion and scarce resources widowed over 40 percent of women in beneficiary households. (Note: In the week before EmbOff's visit, the Issa reportedly killed eight Afaris and looted 200 livestock and camels. The Afari federal parliamentarian alleges Djiboutian government support for the Issa. End Note). The SSH Fund distributed two horses and carts (a lion ate one horse) and 241 goats to primarily widow-headed households with multiple children. Then, through organized income-generating cooperatives, the women breed goats, cart and sell water to the town, and craft grass sleeping mats for sale to passing truckers.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

¶19. (U) Despite its unforgiving climate and desolate

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landscape, even areas of remote Afar showed signs of social infrastructure. Woreda officials escorted EmbOffs to a remote area where a permanent community school, water tower, and single-room health outpost emerged out of the void of the cracked, sun-baked desolation of the environment. As our convoy stopped, a small community slowly materialized from the nothingness of the surroundings to confirm that both their sons and daughters attend the GoE-established school. Further south, in Chifra woreda, community members confirmed that a mosque stood nearby, constructed by the community. Locals also confirmed that they were aware of, and participated in, the local elections conducted in April.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) While these forays into Afar sparked no epiphanies among EmbOffs, they clearly provided texture and detail to Post's perception of this forgotten of Ethiopian regions. Discussions highlighted the environmental threat to the continued viability of Afari pastoralists' very lifestyle. Although the local government has made efforts from its modest resources to establish social services, and local communities also contribute to these efforts, the region's low population density and pastoral lifestyle limits the coverage of these resources. While our visits found no evidence of encroachment of fundamentalist ideology into the region by Wahabist organizations -- either directly or through investments in mosques or schools -- the Afar region's overwhelmingly Muslim and socio-economically marginal population would certainly be fertile ground for such overtures in the absence of alternatives. End Comment.

YAMAMOTO